

Research for development impact: The role of equitable partnerships

The Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA) programme was based on research partnerships between institutions in the global North and South. ESPA's experience highlights some important lessons: partners need to consider how structural asymmetries, unspoken assumptions and operational constraints can affect equity, in spite of good intentions.

Key messages

- **Building relationships is a long-term process.** The first collaboration among two partners may not be the most 'impactful', but may lay the foundations for longer-term collaboration.
- **Money affects power relations among partners.** Northern institutions are usually in charge of managing the budget, and this inevitably affects power dynamics. The implications need to be recognised and openly discussed.
- **Different incentive structures matter.** An equitable partnership is one where the interests and incentives of all partners receive fair recognition.
- **Successful partnerships are built on mutual trust.** Ensuring transparency and accountability can go a long way in promoting trust among partners.
- Adopting an equity framework – structured around the dimensions of **recognition, procedure and distribution** – can help identify where challenges lie, and the ways they can be addressed.

Introduction

Research partnerships between institutions in the global North and global South are widely seen as critical in supporting evidence-based action to address the global issues of sustainable development. Academia is grappling with the challenge of ensuring that partnerships are non-hierarchical, are built on mutual understanding and trust, and reflect the different partners' values and priorities. Funders consistently call for partnerships to be 'equitable', yet operational conditions can run counter to these stated intentions and create disincentives for equity.

This briefing summarises the key learnings that emerged from the ESPA programme in promoting research partnership to achieve development impact. It is based on a comprehensive review of ESPA documentation, including project proposals and reports, an online survey and semi-structured key informant interviews.¹



Rebecca Ashley Asare, NCRC-ESPA Ecolimits project and community members discuss environmental change, Assin, Ghana.

Photo credit: Mairi Dupar, ESPA

What is an equitable partnership?

While there are no commonly agreed criteria of what makes a partnership 'equitable', three core dimensions can be identified as constituent factors of equity:²

Equity dimensions	Key factors to consider in a research partnership
Recognition	Who has a say in designing, planning and implementing the research project? How are the various partner priorities, incentives and practical constraints factored into this?
Procedure	Are there clear and transparent procedures for accountability and for everyone to have a voice?
Distribution	Is there agreement on responsibilities and cost? Is there agreement on how the expected benefits of the partnership will be distributed?

In many partnerships, assumptions are made (not necessarily explicitly, or even consciously) regarding the different strengths that individuals and institutions bring to the table. As a result, North/South research partnerships often fall into a predictable division of labour. Northern partners tend to be most active on project design, relations with funders, academic publications and presentations at academic conferences, as well as interacting with global-level policy processes. Southern partners, for their part, tend to focus mostly on data collection, relations with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and communities, and interacting with local-level decision-making processes, along with providing 'case study' materials for communication and reporting purposes. While this is not necessarily a problem (and may well make the most sense in a specific context), assumptions left unchecked can influence the type of evidence that is produced, and hamper the partnership's transformative potential. Applying an equity framework ensures that a division of labour is achieved by conscious design, rather than by default.



Looking at ESPA projects with hindsight, the duration of the partnership appears to be an important factor for impact.



Lessons learned from ESPA

North/South partnerships have been central to ESPA's ethos and theory of change. ESPA project partnerships have ranged from the very simple (bilateral collaboration between academic institutions in the North and South) to the multifaceted, with multiple layers of complexity (multi-country, interdisciplinary partnerships involving both academic and non-academic actors in different regions). Lessons from ESPA point to key factors that 'matter' in achieving equitable research partnerships:

Building relations is a long-term process

Looking at ESPA projects with hindsight, the duration of the partnership appears to be an important factor for impact. Having a long-standing relationship of collaboration and trust, not conditioned by specific sources of funding or reporting requirements, allows partners to co-design the project based on its contextual relevance. While it may not always be possible, or indeed optimal, for funders to support existing partnerships over new ones, the corollary is that the first collaboration may not be the most effective, at least in terms of concrete deliverables: however, it may well lay the foundation for more impactful work in the future.

The project timeline should allow for relationship-building. It is a natural tendency for project teams to start discussing the nuts and bolts of research (such as sampling and data-collection methods) rather than spending time scoping out the details of the partnership itself. Once the project is underway, intense schedules mean an extremely busy life for the team, and keeping the project on track may come at the expense of reflection and learning.

The Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation programme

9
years
(2009-2018)

3 funders
UK Department for International Development (DFID), Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

125
research
projects

£43.9
million
total value of
the programme



Researchers and information managers interview a national government decision-maker (centre).

Photo credit: Climate and Development Knowledge Network

The practical constraints of working across continents – from poor quality Skype calls to last-minute travel cancellations due to visa hitches – have important implications in terms of time. Such constraints are not simply nuisances: they can affect the functioning of the partnership, and the partners' mutual perceptions and relations, particularly if no allowance is made for them within the project timeline.

Money affects power relations between partners

It is often Northern partners who hold the purse strings: they apply for funding, manage the funds, and report to donors. Given the extremely limited core funding available to them, Southern research institutions are heavily dependent on external grants. Partnership can thus become a 'buyer's market'.

Making time for relationship-building, as discussed above, can be useful to address these embedded asymmetries of power and influence. However, these activities cost money, and in most cases they won't happen unless budget is allocated from the outset. ESPA learning highlights the importance of giving project partners the opportunity to travel to each other's institutions throughout the project – and making sure that travel is not only one-way. As many Southern researchers have remarked, a Skype call can only do so much, particularly with unreliable connectivity: at the end of the day, face-to-face contact makes the difference.

Different incentive structures matter

Partnerships are never just about a research project, and they do not exist in isolation from contextual incentive structures, which may vary widely. All parties have a variety of legitimate objectives, and a successful partnership is one that not only delivers project-related results, but also satisfies these interests in a fair and equitable way, as a key component of the distributive dimension of equity. For example, while publishing is a requirement for academics worldwide, the pressure to publish extensively in high-impact academic journals varies for academics in different regions. Northern parties are also under great pressure to demonstrate impact – a requirement that has grown exponentially over the lifetime of ESPA. Southern academics, while often very attuned to promoting research into use, are not under the same pressure to 'show' impact. This imbalance may frustrate Northern academics, who feel they have to 'chase' their Southern partners for impact-related information needed for reporting purposes. Meanwhile, Southern academics often feel that they are under intense (and at times inconsistent) demands from their Northern partners, which diverge significantly from the requirements of their own institutions.

Case study 1: Attaining Sustainable Services from Ecosystems through Trade-off Scenarios (ASSETS)

The ASSETS project featured a collaboration among several universities, research centres and NGOs in the North (United Kingdom, United States, Spain) and the South (Malawi, Colombia, Peru, South Africa). To promote transparency and properly reward contributions, the project put in place a comprehensive publication protocol, regulating data use and publication authorship. For example, the protocol stipulated that any team member intending to write a paper using project data had to share a one-page concept note with the whole of the ASSETS team, to allow any other team member to participate in the paper if they so wished.

Case study 2: Can Paying for Ecosystems Services Reduce Poverty? (P4GES)

The P4GES project provided training for researchers in Madagascar on how to publish in international journals, covering issues such as targeting the right journal (including understanding 'impact factor', the advantages of open access or not), ensuring you get sent out for review (getting the right title and abstract, and avoiding common errors), and dealing with reviewers' comments. Other short trainings were also given on social research methods, research ethics, data management and quantitative data analysis.

Successful partnerships are built on mutual trust

Many ESPA researchers attributed their partnership's success to positive interpersonal relations, which ranged from purely professional collaborations to personal friendships. Conversely, 'lack of trust' often appears among the challenges of less successful partnerships. Trust, however, is as elusive as it is important: it is mostly developed at the interpersonal level, and is very vulnerable to staff turnover. Time seems to be an essential condition: meeting face-to-face, particularly outside formal meetings, allows trust to flourish, although it does not guarantee it.

While trust itself cannot be engineered, having a strong focus on the procedural dimension of equity can go a long way to promote transparency and accountability, thus giving all partners the confidence that their voice and interests are taken into account. A written Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) can play a crucial role here, clearly spelling out roles and responsibilities and (a crucial, but often ignored, component) mechanisms for dispute resolution.

MOUs should also establish clear agreement on sensitive issues such as intellectual property, data-sharing and authorship.³ While the increasing emphasis on data-sharing and open data can have clear benefits for Southern researchers, there are also concerns that it could result in a 'data drain': structural inequalities between research systems may mean that academics in the South are not in a position to translate data into publications at the same speed as their partners in the North.³



Resources mapping by the ESPA MOUNTAIN-EVO project, Peru.

Photo credit: MOUNTAIN-EVO project

Recommendations for funders

Trade-offs between *equity* and *efficiency* may emerge within the limited timeframe of a research project. Arguably, a partnership that focuses on 'getting things done' by distributing roles according to immediate comparative advantages may get more immediate, visible and 'reportable' outputs, compared to one where time is spent strengthening relationships and capacities, and questioning assumptions, roles, priorities and processes. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, it is important for funders to be aware of where the partnership falls on the spectrum between being 'instrumental' to a particular research question and 'transformative' towards longer-term change.⁴

Funders can play an important role in promoting equity in partnerships, at different stages.

Calls for proposals

- Ensure that there is enough time between the call for proposals and the deadline, to allow for genuine discussion and co-design between Northern and Southern partners, with enough leeway to account for predictable technical hitches.
- Provide clear and consistent guidance to prospective applicants on how partnerships will be assessed. Encourage applicants to be honest about existing challenges and to articulate how they foresee addressing them.
- Consider a stepwise application process, with a final iterative phase where shortlisted proposals can be adapted on the basis of the feedback received. In this way, funders can support applicants to reflect on the equity dimension of their partnership, and develop equity indicators to guide and assess progress.
- Consider providing seed funding to test new potential collaborations (before the start of a research project), as well as ring-fenced funding for partnership-building during the project.
- Ensure that calls are advertised through channels that reach Southern institutions. Even in cases where Northern institutions are the lead applicants, this will allow Southern institutions to be alert to opportunities for partnership and actively pursue them.



Ensure that projects have written partnership agreements, which reflect the different dimensions of equity, and include agreed mechanisms for dispute resolution.



Reviewing proposals

- Ensure that the composition of review panels reflect a North/South balance.
- Provide clear guidance to panel members on how partnership will be assessed and weighted against other selection criteria.
- Prioritise project proposals that include an assessment of the partnership from an equity perspective, and demonstrate to have given serious consideration to factors influencing equity.
- Favourably consider project proposals that demonstrate awareness of the time required to build and sustain equitable partnerships – for example, including a 'lead phase' for in-depth discussion on the vision and functioning of the partnership, particularly in the case of newly established partnerships.
- Assess the feasibility of the budget from the perspective of equity as an integral component of value for money: in particular, ensure that sufficient resources exist in the project budget for partners to travel in both directions, and for Southern partners to attend conferences and events.
- Provide clear feedback to applicants (both successful and unsuccessful), specifically on how their proposal met the partnership requirements of the call.

Project implementation

- Ensure that projects have written partnership agreements, which reflect the different dimensions of equity, and include agreed mechanisms for dispute resolution. These should be living documents that are revisited periodically.
- Encourage and support teams to carve out time throughout a project's life to check the health of the partnership, reflect on lessons learned, and change course if needed. Be open to discussing flexible arrangements if a valid case exists.

Credit

This briefing was written by the ESPA Directorate. It is based on a comprehensive review of ESPA documentation, an online survey and key Informant interviews. The brief also draws on the regular engagement of the ESPA Directorate with project teams, specifically through periodic project catch-up meetings and completion meetings. The evidence is complemented by the results of ESPA Annual Science Conferences and meetings of the International Advisory Board. Thanks go to Professor Virgilio Viana (Fundação Amazonas Sustentável) for contributing to the design and drafting of the brief.

About the ESPA Programme

ESPA is a nine-year global development research programme established in 2009 with funding from the Department for International Development (DFID), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). ESPA is one of the most comprehensive research programmes on linkages between ecosystem services and human wellbeing, aiming to provide world-class research evidence on how ecosystem services can reduce poverty and enhance wellbeing for the world's poor.

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Endnotes

1. The online survey was carried out August-December 2017 (n=38 respondents), and the semi-structured key informant interviews were carried out September 2017-January 2018 (n=15 interviews).
2. This framework builds on ESPA's work on equity in protected areas conservation, see for example Franks, P., A. Martin and K. Schreckenberg (2016) 'From livelihoods to equity for better protected area conservation'. IIED Briefing paper. London: International Institute for Environment and Development.
3. Dodson, J. (2017) *Building partnerships of equals: The role of funders in equitable and effective international development collaborations*. London: UK Collaborative on Development Sciences.
4. See Research and Evidence (2017) *Rethinking research partnerships: Discussion guide and toolkit*. London: Christian Aid/Economic and Social Research Council/the Open University.

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